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An ethnography of global connections : the case of Critical Mass

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study is to identify the social characteristics of the Critical Mass event in Johannesburg, an event that forms part of an international movement. The international Critical Mass movement is made up of 350 participating cities around the world where cyclists ride as unregulated groups, on the last Friday of every month, to take back the streets from cars. My study investigates who rides in the Critical Mass event in Johannesburg, how they move through the inner city streets as a group and reasons given by the organisers and the participants for why the ride occurs. This study was conducted as a patchwork ethnography, where I participated in and observed the ride, but also collected secondary data (archives, maps, media sources, public reports and conferences/meetings) implicated at the ride. Using Anna Tsing's (2005) conceptual frameworks 'friction' and 'global connection' I suggest that my findings point to the particularities, a number of contextual factors that reach beyond the ride itself, but are always already contingent on moments of friction during the ride. I explain that the moments of frictions make clear the multiple chains implicated during the ride, that is the everyday. I argue that these chains are dynamic connections to identity, spatial and discursive privilege during the ride. This account of the particularities of the Johannesburg event, as cycling in Africa, the global South, fill the gap in the research on Critical Mass that is focused on Western accounts of the ride. Furthermore, as an experimental approach in anthropology my use of the patchwork method and connections contribute to new and political ways of thinking about the global South. Lastly, my study provides a lens to look at cycling advocacy.